NEWS from
The Savannah River Site

Media Contact: Angeline French
(803) 952-8671
angeline.french@srs.gov

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

40-YEAR ERA COMES TO A CLOSE

AIKEN, S.C. (October 29, 2003) – After almost 40 years of safely receiving, handling and storing spent nuclear fuel, the employees of the Savannah River Site's Receiving Basin for Offsite Fuels (RBOF – pronounced "rub-off") removed the last unit of fuel from the basin yesterday, shipping the bundle across the site to its new location, in preparation for RBOF's closure. "This is not just the end of an era," said Westinghouse Savannah River Company President Bob Pedde. "It's an achievement that puts the perfect finishing touch on this facility's proud history. Not too long ago, we thought that completing this task by 2006 would be difficult. Now, here we are, celebrating the completion ahead of that schedule." All of the fuel once stored in RBOF has now been moved to the site's canyon facilities for processing or to the storage basin in the site's L Area.

"These achievements underscore the significant progress in the department's efforts to accelerate cleanup across the Nation," Assistant Secretary of Environmental Management Jessie Roberson said. "These actions protect the worker and the public, and reduce the total costs and schedule leading to site cleanup."

RBOF was built in the early 1960s to help the nation fulfill its obligations under the Atoms for Peace plan initiated by President Eisenhower in 1953. Under Atoms for Peace, the United States provided nuclear technology, including uranium fuel, to foreign countries to pursue research into peaceful applications in the fields of medicine, agriculture or industry. The agreement stipulated that – for security reasons – the spent fuel would be returned to the U.S. after use by foreign researchers. RBOF also held spent fuel from research reactors at U.S. universities and laboratories and SRS' spent fuel.

To avoid the cost of operating multiple facilities, SRS had decided in 1998 to consolidate all of the stored spent fuel at SRS into the much larger, recently refurbished L Basin. Plans called for all the fuel to be moved from RBOF no later than September 2007, with a goal of completing the move by March 2006. In 2002, when the site adopted aggressive new targets for speeding the cleanup of the site, that goal was moved to September 2004. The task was completed nearly a year ahead of that new schedule.

(more)

RBOF 2/2/2

By safely accelerating the "deinventory" of RBOF, as the removal of all the fuel units is called, the site is saving approximately $12 million per year in operating costs. These savings will free up funds to support additional accelerated cleanup activities at the site, including operations for the disposition of the site's legacy materials.

"The deinventory of spent nuclear fuel from RBOF is a major milestone in the accelerated cleanup effort at SRS. It was completed a year ahead of schedule, it will save the U.S. taxpayers millions in annual operating costs, and it will reduce risk to our workers and the public," said Jeff Allison, DOE's Savannah River Operations Office manager. "The SRS workers in the spent fuel program should be proud of this accomplishment."

Pedde said that the employees were able to complete the deinventory ahead of the original schedule because of teamwork across departments, careful planning and unique engineering solutions. "When they laid out the schedule prior to the start of the project, they immediately started looking for opportunities to safely accelerate the critical path activities. As you can see, they were extremely successful," he said.

Among the technical challenges facing the staff was the need to find the most efficient way to safely move each of the different types of fuel. "By 2001, they had moved thousands of units of aluminum-based fuels, which were standardized in terms of shape and type," Pedde said. "But when they began moving the 800 units of non-aluminum fuels, they were looking at dozens of different shapes and types, each with different challenges. The operators repacked each piece into a suitable bundle for long-term storage and loaded it into a robust cask for shipment across the site."

Most of the innovations developed in the course of this project were for the specific purpose of enhancing employee safety. For some of the older fuels, this repackaging effort also provided an opportunity to gain additional information, which will be useful as plans progress for final disposition.

NOTE: Still photography and video footage are available from the media contact above.

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